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Counter Punch

Sparring for the Un of it

BY MEREDITH BRODY

RICHARD MELTZER IS ONE OF MY favorite writers. About anything (rock, architecture and himself spring to mind). But I also remember with great fondness a restaurant column, yes, a restaurant column, he wrote that appeared in *Stuff* magazine on a regular basis and alerted me to the considerable possibilities inherent in a restaurant meal worthy of analysis and comment beyond the obvious ones of food and drink. In fact, his *opinions* about food and drink don't interest me at all, that is, not for their empirical value. (We have long ago established, more or less amicably, that our tastes in food do not agree in the slightest, starting with Richard's inviolable premise that all non-haute-cuisine restaurants in New York turn out much better food than their counterparts in Los Angeles, and ending with my suspicion that he thinks his greater tolerance for hot sauce means that his palate is much more sophisticated than mine. Ha.)

It's the style I'm after, the style that will invent steamed parrot burgers for a piece on good L.A. hamburgers and continue, "Et a few myself once in Perth, Tasmania and found it too (I hate the word) insubstantial — sort of a cross between duck ceviche and a *soft* pigeon tostada." Riffs. He's the only writer on food who makes me laugh out loud (well, Calvin Trillin on a good day, but he really elicits more of a knowing smile).

Anyway, the other day Richard asked if I had noticed a place called **Un Steak** in a mini-mall on Beverly Boulevard, and I said, yeah, but I'd sort of avoided going in because I read it as *Un*steak, like some cute name for either a vegetarian joint or some fast-food shaped-and-formed-from-chicken-byproducts stand, and Richard said, no, the place was run by what appeared to be recent Asian immigrants who expected the sign to be read in French, that is, *Un Steak*. A steak. One steak. (Which, correct me if I'm wrong, I think would be spelled *Un Biftеck* — at least, that's the way I saw it back in my halcyon student days in old gay Paree.)

We both found this name confusion unbearably poignant, and as I wanted to take R. out anyway — to celebrate not one but two literary triumphs (the reprints by Citadel Underground of his 1972 collection of essays, *Gulcher*, due out in the fall, and a contract from Crown for Richard's first novel, whose title he will not divulge; watch for wh.tever by Richard Meltzer in about three years) — and since we were hungry *now*, we rounded up one of Richard's friends, the lovely and talented Miss Irene Forrest, and my pal Jonathan, partly because they both live within a four-block range of Un Steak.

So there we were, seated side by side at an unusually beautiful, warm wooden counter (there's only counter seating) on unusually beautiful, matching wooden stools with leaf-shaped backs. And we watched as the solitary grill cook behind the counter prepared our four meals, carefully and sequentially, so that first I got my New York steak ("10-oz. jumbo size," $8.75); then Jonathan his Un Steak (top sirloin "with Frenchy mushroom sauce," $6.50, both served with steamed rice topped, if you wish, with a comforting chicken-based gravy full of chopped vegetables); then Irene her Japanese steak (a special, including fresh vegetable soup or cream-of-potato soup, for $4.75), sukiyaki-sliced meat grilled up with green pepper and celery and served over rice; and lastly Richard his plain grilled vegetables ("No salt, no spices" but quite tasty in spite of that, with rice, $4.50). All washed down with canned oolong tea, carbonated lychee juice, and beer that they let us bring in from the liquor store around the corner.

CHRISTINE HABERSTOCK

What sprang to mind about the food we ate were the words "soft, sweet, salty": my New York, ordered rare, served alas unappetizingly gray (though pink inside), was either from an *amazingly* contented cow or had been relaxed in some other fashion. Irene's beef sauce was sweet and salty, as was the rice gravy.

Un Steak is not a gastronomic find, but it's cheap and pretty and has things on the menu I'd like to order: Soft Steak ("round beef marinated with broccoli and seven spices," $4.25); a smoked-chicken sandwich for $3.55.

I don't like to eat at counters in a group, but it's perfect for a solitary meal or with another person. It's style over content. LA

Un Steak is located at 7823 Beverly Blvd., and is open Mon.-Sat. 8 a.m.-mid., and Sun. 10 a.m.-mid. Call (213) 933-3738. BYO beer or wine. Takeout. Parking lot. Cash only.

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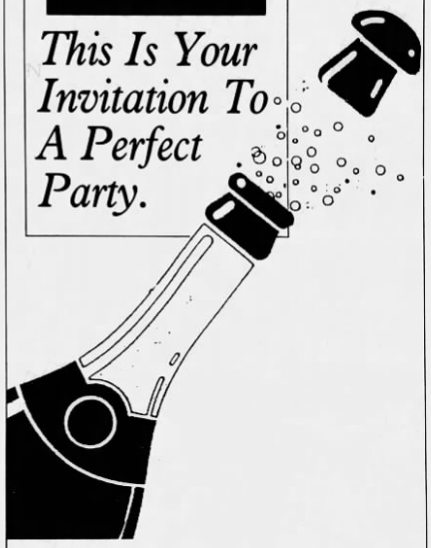

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